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Forum: Universal Basic Income

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Response to Lindsey Macdonald's "We are All Housewives: Universal Basic Income as Wages for Housework"

Tai Neilson

ABSTRACT What types of subjectivities and political actors are emerging around calls for UBI? Lindsey Macdonald's article, "We Are All Housewives," eloquently speaks to the concept of universality, while also situating socialist-feminist demands for UBI within specific activist traditions. I pose questions about the distinctions between different socialist arguments for UBI and the political groups that advocate for its implementation: first, what are the differences between autonomist and feminist proposals; and, second, how might we distinguish and evaluate organizations that are fighting for a feminist-socialist UBI?

I appreciate being invited to take part in this forum on universal basic income (UBI) and to respond to [Lindsey Macdonald's article](#).¹ The Marxist approaches developed by the authors are diverse and compelling, and I'll engage them within this framework. My entry into debates surrounding UBI has, for the most part, come from Marxist autonomist work on labor and technology. There are significant overlaps between feminist and autonomist approaches (Silvia Federici's writing and activism are obvious examples²). Macdonald's article provides an opportunity to think through these different arguments for UBI, and consider the particularity and universality of feminist approaches.

From the outset, I should note that I am cautious about the prospects and potential of UBI. It may well be an intervention that can reduce inequalities, address stigmas and uncertainties associated with existing social welfare provisions, and facilitate more creative, freer relationships to working (and not working).³ Yet, I am not convinced it is either immanently achievable or that, as a longer-term strategy, it can light our way out of the darkness of capital. As Macdonald argues, "the version of basic income we get will depend on the political forces that shape it." The likelihood of UBI and, perhaps more importantly, the ways UBI could take shape are dependent on the subjectivities and collective political actors that form around these demands.

One of the major strengths of Macdonald's argument is that it returns questions about UBI to the solid ground of women's struggles over reproductive labor and domestic work. She presents advocacy for UBI as part of the long history of movements for women's emancipation and contributes to feminist debates surrounding UBI.⁴ For example, Macdonald identifies National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) activists, primarily black working-class women, who took their protests and demands to welfare offices in the United States in the 1960s. And she argues that they articulated critiques of the welfare state with demands to extend welfare provisions. They are presented as part of this shared political history.

By the mid-1970s these struggles constituted globalizing movements for the rights of women and domestic workers. The International Feminist Collective in Italy, England, France, and the United States launched the Wages for Housework campaign in 1972. Members of the movement, including Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Leopoldina Fortunati drew attention to women's, often individual, "invisible struggles." They did so in order to bring them out of the relative atomization of domestic life and present them as a public model for challenging patriarchy and capital. Federici, who worked in Nigeria for a time, also emphasizes women's struggles against colonialism, structural adjustments, and other threats to their livelihoods in the global South.⁵ There are difficulties in harnessing this diverse activism to a single narrative. Yet, socialist feminist calls for UBI are strongest when they are based on a critique of specific, gendered forms of exploitation and have an organic relationship to groups that have emerged to address them.

The title of Macdonald's piece, "We are All Housewives," eloquently speaks to the concept of universality in UBI. To unpack the concept of universality we can return to Marx. For Marx, the proletariat is the "universal class" in a double sense.⁶ In its first sense, the particular interests of the working class are, at the same time, interests common to all members of society. Similarly, socialist feminist arguments for UBI are grounded in unequal experiences of gendered distinctions that feminize reproductive work, while associating the "breadwinner" role with masculinity. They are rooted in women's struggles for the recognition and remuneration of domestic work. But, these arguments are not solely intended to remunerate the reproductive work of women nor are they restricted to a specific gender or caregiver status (as important as these goals are).⁷ They are extended universally.

The second meaning of the "universal class," for Marx, is that a proletariat revolution would not only eliminate the conditions for the existence of the capitalist class, it would inaugurate a classless society.⁸ Socialist feminist calls for UBI do not simply intend to mitigate the marginalization of women and the types of work that are predominantly performed by women; they are intended to undermine the links between patriarchy and capital in a way that could radically transform gender relations. On this basis, UBI should not simply make it easier for women to be caregivers but it also undermines gendered divisions of labor that associate women with care roles. In these ways, socialist feminist approaches to UBI found a universal project for emancipation in the lived experiences of women.

My questions for Macdonald revolve around the distinctions between different socialist arguments for UBI and the different political groups that advocate for its implementation. Macdonald points to divisions between proposals for UBI that emerge from those on the right, liberals, and socialists. There are also less obvious differences between arguments for UBI that come from within the socialist left. Autonomist proponents of UBI, for instance, assimilate aspects of feminist approaches to unpaid and productive work, but emphasize the ways in which new technologies expand the sphere of labor and exploitation. They argue that UBI is not a state welfare provision for the excluded, marginalized, or precarious. Rather, it is a salary for those participating in the "social factory."⁹










Autonomists herald the shift to post-Fordism or cognitive capitalism, which is characterized by the dispersed production and circulation of the informational, cultural, and affective commodities.¹⁰ Stefano Lucarelli and Andrea Fumagalli base their argument for a universal basic income on these shifts. Under conditions of cognitive capitalism, they insist real wages are no longer indexed to productivity. UBI, then, constitutes a new model of "compensation for social productivity."¹¹ Autonomists, however, have struggled to






identify the political subjectivities or movements in which to ground these demands after the weakening of the institutions of industrial labor.¹² While I only have room for a brief schematic here, one task may be to map out differences between these approaches. What are the strengths of socialist feminist arguments for UBI over autonomist approaches?

Another challenge is to identify the existing groups that are fighting for the goals that could underpin a socialist feminist vision of UBI. If, as Macdonald argues, there is a shared homology between campaigns for UBI and Wages for Housework, then which organizations are the successors of the NWRO or the International Feminist Collective's Wages for Housework? For instance, based on a brief search of the major US and European organizations for UBI, Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) and United States Basic Income Guarantee (USBIG) have engaged with some feminist arguments. They also incorporate perspectives from across the political spectrum. As these are two of the largest organizations advocating UBI, we could benefit from a socialist feminist critique of their respective approaches.

To take a group which has stronger ties to working class communities, the National Domestic Workers Alliance advocates for the legal rights of both paid domestic workers and unpaid carers. Their Executive Director, Ai-jen Poo, has advocated for UBI as a key pillar alongside provisions for carers and a stronger voice for workers.¹³ Their work intersects class, race, and gender.¹⁴ Another necessary intervention, then, would be to map the terrain of these organizations, the ways they frame their advocacy, and the types of UBI they promote. Are there already organizations prioritizing a socialist feminist UBI, and by what criteria can we judge their approaches?

Notes

1. Lindsey Macdonald "We are All Housewives: Universal Basic Income as Wages for Housework," *Lateral* 7, no. 2 (2018), <http://csalateral.org/section/universal-basic-income/basic-income-housewives-wages-housework-macdonald/>. 
2. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012). 
3. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). 
4. See, for instance: Caitlin McLean and Ailsa McKay, "Beyond Care: Expanding the Feminist Debate on Universal Basic Income," 2015, https://www.gcu.ac.uk/wise/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/90324WiSE_BriefingSh
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5. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 97. 
6. Renzo Llorente, "Marx's Concept of 'Universal Class': A Rehabilitation," *Science & Society* 77, no. 4 (2013): 540. 
7. Ailsa McKay, "Rethinking Work and Income Maintenance Policy: Promoting Gender Equality through a Citizens' Basic Income," *Feminist Economics* 7, no. 1 (2001): 97–118. 
8. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 280. 
9. Carlo Vercellone, "From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism," *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007): 13–36. 

10. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (London: Routledge, 1996), 132–146. 
11. Stefano Lucarelli and Andrea Fumagalli, "Basic Income and Productivity in Cognitive Capitalism," *Review of Social Economy* 66, no. 1 (2008): 71–92 
12. Franco Berardi and Jack Bratich, "What About the Dark Side of Multitude?" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2011): 310–12. 
13. Ai-jen Poo, "What a Basic Income Would Mean to Domestic Workers," *Economic Security Project*, 2017, <https://medium.com/economicsecproj/what-a-basic-income-would-mean-to-domestic-workers-69c30d6abbd2>. 
14. Asha DuMonthier, Chandra Childers, and Jessica Milli, "The Status of Black Women in the US," National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2017, https://www.domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/SOBW_report2017_ExecutiveSummary.pdf. 

 [Bio](#)

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